PINK-A-BOO AND MY MOMENT OF PREMATURE CONFIDENCE

V.N.

PINK-A-BOO Camellia sasanqua 'MonDel'

Sometimes a friend sends you a picture of a flower.

At first, it seems like a small thing: a snapshot of a few bushes in a garden, some blossoms in bloom, green leaves catching the light. But then, like pulling one loose thread from a sweater, the story begins to unravel.

A flower leads to a friend. A friend leads to an old city. And an old city leads you straight back to childhood, somewhere among the orchid plants in a garden in Da Lat.

That is how my story with *Pink-a-Boo* began.

The person who sent me the photographs was Hao, an older friend of mine in Seattle.

I have quite a few friends who are older than I am. Perhaps it has something to do with my lifelong tendency to be a little bit of a *"young old man."* Even when I was young, I seemed to enjoy listening to people who had lived longer and seen more than I had. Maybe that is why, over the years, I have been fortunate enough to acquire so many older friends—people who began as acquaintances and somehow became friends.

In Seattle, they include Tran Mong Tu, Nguyen Tuong Thiet, Le Huu, and Hao.

Hao is a special case, though. She is the only one of them I have never actually met in person.

That may sound strange in this age of instant communication.

But these days, two people can exchange emails, read each other's writing, talk about books, poetry, flowers, and old friends—and know quite a bit about each other—without ever having sat across a table together over a cup of coffee or tea.

Hao and I almost met once.

Tran Mong Tu, Trung Duong, and Bui Bich Ha had arranged to come to my house for lunch. The plan was simple: eat something, drink tea, and talk about books, poetry, and literature.

For people who love words, no formal agenda is necessary. Give us a table, a few dishes, a pot of tea, and someone who mentions a book, and we can easily talk from lunchtime into the afternoon.

Hao was supposed to join us.

But at the last minute, I heard that she had to go visit a friend in Riverside—or somewhere in that general neighborhood—and had to bow out.

“Another time,” she said.

That “another time” has yet to arrive. But that's all right. Friendship does not always require a face-to-face meeting.

Some people sit beside us every day and never manage to say anything that really matters. Others live

hundreds or thousands of miles away, send us an occasional email, and somehow remain as familiar as the neighbor next door.

I met Hao quite by accident.

It began with an email chain among friends who love Vietnamese literature. Everyone was debating—or, more accurately, guessing and arguing—about the kind of orchid mentioned in Nhất Linh's short story *Forest Orchid*.

Nhất Linh, of course, was the father of my friend Nguyen Tuong Thiet.

That brought us to orchids. And orchids brought me into the conversation. I am certainly no botanist but I did have a little childhood experience to contribute.

I grew up for a while in Da Lat, the misty mountain city of Vietnam. My uncle-in-law had a fairly well-known orchid garden there. It wasn't the No. 1 orchid garden in Da Lat, but it may have ranked somewhere around No. 2 or No. 3.

Da Lat in those days was a city of pine trees, fog, flower gardens—and people who could devote an astonishing amount of time to caring for a plant that, to someone who didn't love flowers, might look like nothing more than a bunch of leaves dangling from a piece of bark.

My uncle taught me how to recognize and care for different kinds of epiphytic orchids, the plants

Vietnamese gardeners call *phong lan*, as well as terrestrial orchids, or *địa lan*.

I remember some orchids that looked as though they were nothing more than a handful of dried tea leaves—black, shriveled, and apparently dead. Yet give them hot water and proper care, and they would come back to life. Green shoots would appear. New growth would emerge.

The plant that had looked dead had merely been waiting for its season.

Other orchids were a deep, almost startling purple, but their strange shapes reminded me of the face of some devilish spider.

Still others had flowers and stems sticking out in such odd directions that, to a child, they looked like a little sand scorpion waving its claws from a bush.

Perhaps that is why I have never been able to look at flowers as merely flowers.

Every plant seems to have a story.

And sometimes that story is longer than a human lifetime.

Then came the day Hao sent photographs of several camellia bushes growing in her garden.

Among them was a variety with a wonderfully playful name: Pink-a-Boo.

The name sounds like something a child might say while hiding behind a curtain:

“Peek-a-boo!”

“I see you!”

Pink-a-Boo!

Hao mentioned that she had never had the chance to research the variety very deeply.

That made me smile.

Because if anyone in our group deserves the title “our *number-one* flower scholar,” it is Hao.

She is, without question, the most knowledgeable flower researcher among us.

And yet there I was, armed with little more than childhood memories of orchids in Da Lat, volunteering immediately:

“Let me look it up!”

So I fired up a search engine. And the search engine answered with great confidence.

It was completely wrong.

According to the first answer I found, Pink-a-Boo was "*a dwarf variety of Hydrangea macrophylla, a type of hydrangea.*"

I read it and nearly believed it. Fortunately, I took another look at Hao's photographs.

Hydrangea? With camellia leaves? A hydrangea with those glossy, dark-green leaves and those golden stamens? Something didn't add up.

So I had to write back and correct myself—and promise Hao that this time I would do some proper research. No more jumping to conclusions. No more being the fellow who answers first and checks later.

It was a useful little lesson in the age of search engines.

In the old days, if you wanted to identify a flower, you might have to find a botanical book, consult a gardener, ask an expert, or travel somewhere to see the plant for yourself.

Today, you type a few words into a search box.

The danger is that a fast answer can make us feel that we know more than we actually do.

A wrong answer delivered with confidence can be surprisingly persuasive.

Fortunately, flowers don't lie.

Look closely, and they will tell you the truth.

After checking more carefully, I discovered that the Pink-a-Boo in Hao's garden is actually a fall-blooming camellia, botanically known as *Camellia sasanqua 'MonDel.'*

It has a rather charming history.

'MonDel' is a natural *sport*, or mutation, of the well-known camellia cultivar 'Yuletide.' The familiar 'Yuletide' has brilliant red flowers with golden-yellow stamens. At a Monrovia nursery in Azusa, California, growers discovered a branch producing flowers in a beautiful shade of pink. That unusual branch was selected and propagated, eventually becoming the cultivar now marketed as Pink-a-Boo®.

The name 'MonDel' has a story of its own. "Mon" refers to Monrovia, while "Del" was associated with the name of the daughter of the person who discovered the plant. So even the name of a flower can carry a little piece of someone's family history.

Pink-a-Boo produces *cheerful pink flowers with bright golden stamens*. Its blossoms are larger and more showy - with seven petals - than those of its 'Yuletide' parent, and the flowers have a light fragrance. The

plant has glossy, dark-green evergreen foliage and works beautifully as a garden shrub, hedge, border plant, or container specimen. And it blooms when many other flowers are beginning to take a winter vacation.[1]

That is one of the things I especially like about it.

Yuletide sports into Pink-a-boo

Pink-a-Boo is not simply a different color of camellia. It is a *sport* of another plant.

Same family.

Same botanical heritage.

[1] https://www.monrovia.com/pink-a-boo-camellia.html

And then, somewhere along the way, nature decided to improvise.

Red became pink.

Not because somebody in a laboratory sat down with a measuring cup and calculated exactly how much red to mix with how much white. A branch simply changed. And someone with a sharp eye noticed.

I think people are like that, too.

Within the same family, the same circumstances, even the same generation, one person may suddenly head in an entirely different direction.

One becomes an engineer, another becomes a poet.

One loves crowds, another prefers a quiet chair by the window.

One grows orchids, another writes books about them.

We sometimes assume that everything growing from the same root ought to look alike.

Nature clearly disagrees. It allows for *sports*.

And sometimes those unexpected differences are exactly what make a garden—or a family—more interesting.

Thinking about Pink-a-Boo made me think about my older friends.

Perhaps friendship is a little like a flower.

You rarely know exactly when it begins.

My friendship with Hao began with an email chain.

If someone had not mentioned Nhất Linh's *Forest Orchid*, if our group had not started arguing about what kind of orchid he meant, if Nguyen Tuong Thiet had not been part of that conversation, if I had not spent part of my childhood wandering through my uncle's orchid garden in Da Lat... I might never have known Hao. And I certainly wouldn't be sitting here today, looking at photographs of a pink camellia growing in a Seattle garden and writing about her.

Life is woven from such accidents.

An email.

A book.

An orchid.

A misty mountain city.

A friend you have never met.

A pink flower.

Sometimes a friendship begins with a very small question: “What kind of flower is this?”

And from there, people start talking.

About flowers.

Then books.

Then mutual friends.

Then the past.

And one day you realize that somehow, without noticing, you have become friends.

I still haven't met Hao.

That lunch with Tran Mong Tu, Trung Duong, and Bui Bich Ha remains on my life's long list of things that were supposed to happen “another time.”

I'm not worried.

Flowers have their seasons.

Friendships have seasons, too.

Some meetings have to wait for the right moment.

Perhaps one day Hao will come to Southern California. Or perhaps I will find myself in Seattle. We'll sit down together, and I suspect our first question will not be about anything terribly important.

I might simply ask:

“So, how did the Pink-a-Boo do this year?”

She'll laugh.

I'll remind her of the day a search engine confidently turned her *Camellia sasanqua ‘MonDel’* into a *dwarf hydrangea*.

We'll laugh again.

And then, knowing us, the conversation will wander.

From Pink-a-Boo to Nhất Linh.

From Nhất Linh to *Forest Orchid*.

From *Forest Orchid* back to the orchids of Da Lat.

From Da Lat to some poem.

People who love flowers and books have a bad habit of doing that.

We never quite finish a conversation.

A flower is only the excuse.

Looking back, I suppose my little episode of premature confidence had its benefits.

If the search engine had given me the correct answer the first time, I might simply have sent Hao a short email:

— "Pink-a-Boo is *Camellia sasanqua 'MonDel.'*"

End of story.

Instead, because the search engine was wrong, I had to look again.

And because I looked again, I learned about 'Yuletide.' I learned that Pink-a-Boo began as a natural sport. I learned about the California nursery where the unusual plant was discovered. I learned that a pink flower can carry a history involving gardeners, families, names, chance, and careful observation. And, most important, I had another reason to think about a friend I have never actually met.

Perhaps that is the real gift.

In life, discovering that you were wrong can sometimes teach you more than being right the first time.

So Pink-a-Boo is no longer, for me, simply a pink camellia.

It is a flower growing in a friend's garden in Seattle.

It is a friend I have yet to meet.

It is an email chain about Nhất Linh and orchids.

It is an orchid garden in Da Lat.

It is a seemingly dead plant that came back to life after water touched it.

And it is also a gentle reminder to someone who occasionally gets a little too enthusiastic with his answers: *Before you tell someone what a flower is, take another good look at the flower.*

The flower will still be there.

Quietly blooming.

It won't argue.

It won't debate.

It won't send you an email correcting your mistakes.

It simply blooms.

And if we take the time to look closely, sometimes a flower can teach us more than a search engine ever could.